

5SHORT.DOC

After winter subsides and the feed wagons are parked, the shortgrass country scrambles to finish roundups before the mesquite trees leaf. Soon the thick jungle draws the woolies into dark shadows and inspires the hollow horns to plunge off into the thickets. Livestock is gentled about as much as a four-legged animal can be by being trained to come to feed. Nevertheless, where the cedar bushes blot out the horizon and the mesquites are so thick the sky only shows at certain angles of the sun, cowboys are necessary to complete the counts.

Four-footed or four-wheeled mounted men are the choice. Bigger outfits go to the air, but not many of those are around in our country. A roundup horse at a thousand bucks plus a tad more, or a 4-wheeler at \$3,000 not counting tax, about does most of us in for the year. A knocked-down hip joint or a bent drive shaft can throw those options out of order. I favor the oldtime method of working horseback, yet it must be admitted that far more day workers are better prepared for handlebars than bridle reins.

Mass exodus of the Mexican cowboys to the city for higher wages brought a drastic downturn in our labor supply. Once the wives started working in town to help send the kids through school, ties to the country were broken forever. Short periods of relief came from bad times in the oilfields, but after the Mexican people quit us, we pretty well stayed short-handed in the pens and outnumbered in the pastures.

Biggest losers were the women left on the ranches. Two-way radio talk doesn't sound like an oldtime party line telephone service of chicken a la king recipes and baby formulas. The Aunt Bessie's and the Betty Ruth's may stop at the beauty parlor for a chat to discuss the yearling weaning weights of cattle, or effective rates of cottonseed meal supplements. Chances are, however, they'll have to find a place to park a gooseneck load of feed before they can land for a haircut.

Last year, I overheard a lady praising her son for giving them an automated feeder and an overhead bulk tank for a Christmas present. Her husband broke his leg the first ice storm of the winter. Until her son's gift, she was stringing cake for their cattle from a 50-pound bag. Lifting and loading sacked goods showed to be good for her. She looked young and vigorous for her age.

Must have been awful hard on her husband to be cooped up in front of the television set all day and have her come creeping in to serve him leftovers. Just going from the wood box to the fireplace, or to the refrigerator on crutches juggling a cold beer can is a tedious job. Things get mighty explosive when the man of the house becomes couch-ridden or recliner-hobbled, to leave the mother of the house in charge of the ranch and the kids on the Thursday afternoon the PTA expects her to bring four dozen pimento cheese sandwiches to the basketball game.

At a meeting last month, a wool warehouseman sprung the idea of creating a board to certify sheep shearers. Wool graders, he said, were already being certified. Made me wish for

a board to license stock hands. We desperately needed a review board to apprehend impersonators before they were ever hired to leave town. Just a simple test like checking their boot heels for spur marks, or looking at their chaps for signs of chain guard wear, would weed out a lot of phonies. A pop quiz on the correct vocabulary to use if, say, a calf broke loose just before a four-wheeler stalled, or faithful "old Dunny" spooked at a chickadee's shadow just as he was needed to head a cow, would certainly identify the genuine article.

Few herders discuss labor problems. I hear about Hoot and Mary Jo rounding up 15 sections covered in woolies on two tanks of gasoline, or about Ray and Jody Fay marking their calves on weekends the kids come home from school to practice barrel racing. Does slow down deporting the graybeards and grannies off to the final holding pens at the nursing homes. Just about any age person able to block a gate is welcome on the modern-day outfits.